

## **Baltimore County Animal Services Advisory Commission 2022 Annual Report**

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### **I. Introduction**

This year continues to be quite challenging for both BCAS and the Advisory Commission. Staffing at BCAS is one of the Commission's biggest concerns, specifically in higher level positions. (The Commission wants to stress that this pattern of inconsistent and lack of leadership predates the staffing shortage recently witnessed throughout the country since the pandemic.) There has been high turnover and gaps in leadership during the following timeframes:

- In March 2019, four members of the BCAS leadership team were removed. The Chief position remained unfilled until September 2019 when Kevin Usilton was hired.
- Kevin Usilton left BCAS in June 2020 after just nine months. Dr. Sandra Andrulis was appointed as interim chief and later became full-time chief. She resigned in December 2021.
- The chief position was unfilled from December 2021 until October 2022 when Carrie McCloskey was appointed.

Please note this snapshot does not include the timeline of the Deputy Chief position but yet it still exhibits the same characteristics. The significant gaps in leadership in this snapshot are concerning. During these times, Dr. Lucia Donatelli has served as interim chief, in addition to her primary full-time position as bureau director with the Department of Health and Human Services. This instability is completely unacceptable and has had a detrimental impact on BCAS' ability to be effective. Even more concerning is that the shelter is seeing a record high intake of animals and their live release rate has fallen, ultimately calling for dedicated, innovative, and committed leadership more than ever. The Commission has reviewed the intake and live release numbers from other local open admission shelters.

These organizations have had consistent leadership and have shown that maintaining high live release numbers is very possible despite the increase in intake.

As noted, BCAS has seen an increase in animal intake in 2022. According to the Commission's communication with BCAS staff, this is attributed to post-pandemic issues. The shelter reports that a large number of the dogs are adolescents who are untrained and not socialized, with subsequent behavior issues, thus creating challenges for staff and volunteers, and for placing them in new homes or with rescue partners. While the Commission appreciates this perspective, this again validates the need for strong leadership that is ready and willing to dive into the research and resources to survive such challenges.

The Advisory Commission has experienced its own challenges this year due to changes in the commission membership. Despite these challenges, the Commission has been able to maintain effective communication with the shelter. The Commission is extremely grateful to the BCAS staff who have always kept an open line of communication, allowing the Commission to fulfill the purpose of advising the County Council and County Executive regarding animal welfare/sheltering topics.

Deborah Stone Hess stepped down from the Commission and as chair in March 2022, and Chris Shaughness assumed the chair position. The commission met in April, May, and June, then voted to take a summer hiatus from meetings in July and August.

Due to some challenges with a Commission member, we did not have meetings in September, October, and November; therefore, the Commission has not met formally since June 2022. Despite the lack of meetings, there has been consistent contact and collaboration among commission members via email. The issues with the Commission member are still being addressed.

The Commission's members submit this report respectfully to the Baltimore County Executive and members of the Baltimore County Council.

## **II. Shelter Data**

There has been consistent concern about the increase in animal intake and what appears to be a lower live release rate. To gain a better understanding, the Commission first reviewed the shelter numbers (cats and dogs) for years 2019, 2020, and 2021. In addition, the shelter reviewed the same numbers for 2022, but with the numbers ending on October 23, 2022.

Below is a list of intakes for cats and dogs based on year:

2019: 5,506

2020: 4,352

2021: 4,715

2022: 4,846 (as of close of business 10/23/2022)

Based on the current intake for 2022, the shelter is averaging an intake of 16 cats and/or dogs per a day. Therefore, it would be guesstimated that the shelter will close the year with a total intake (cats and dogs) of 5,966. This would be an 8% increase from 2019 (pre-pandemic).

\*Please note the numbers provided to the Commission do not include exotics and small animals (rabbits, birds, guinea pigs, etc.).

In reviewing the live release rate, there is a noticeable decrease.

Overall Live Release Rate:

2019 - 90%

2020 - 90.9%

2021 - 86.6%

2022 - 83.1%

Addendum January 10, 2023

The shelter informed the commission that the overall live release rate for 2022 was 84.6%.

To gain a greater perspective, the Commission reviewed data from the Shelter Animals Count's website. This website is a national standardized database for shelter reporting. The website has published multiple reports declaring a nationwide influx of animals at animal shelters, thus confirming BCAS' experience is not isolated. The Commission then reviewed the national numbers for shelters labeled as Government Animal Services & Animal Shelters with Government Contracts to determine the national live release rate for 2022 (through September 2022) and found a rate of 89.5%. Therefore, BCAS is falling below the national average.

Finally, the Commission pulled the numbers (through Shelter Animals Count) for BARCS (Baltimore City) and found their current 2022 (through September 2022) live release rate to be 89.1%. Again, BCAS is falling below this live release rate.

By reviewing this information, it has been concluded that BCAS is not alone in experiencing an influx of animals but BCAS appears to be struggling to cope more than other shelters with this influx.

The Commission encourages the shelter to strongly evaluate the possible deficits contributing to their lower live release rate. Some of these reviews may include: increased social media presence, more adoption events, increased foster program, increased enrichment to animals to divert behavior concerns, increased community involvement, and much more.

The Commission also believes that the County Council and County Executive can have a positive impact in enhancing the operations. A more efficient hiring process is a high priority. Additionally, we encourage consideration of possible partnerships with non-profits

that could enhance some of BCAS' required operations. Please consider BCAS' staff input when noting possible deficits in operations due to their extensive experience.

The Commission wants the County Council and County Executive to understand that the animal shelters in the Maryland area can have different modes of operation that may create differences in the way that they budget and in their intake of animals. Baltimore County Animal Services' mode of operations is strictly managed by its local government; whereas, the city of Baltimore has a private partnership with a non-profit known as BARCS. Despite this difference, the Commission feels it is still important to compare such shelters, for these different modalities are all still responsible for managing the homeless animals in their designated jurisdiction.

The Commission has also reviewed the community services provided to county residents. At this time, BCAS is administering rabies vaccines and microchips at a higher rate than they did during 2019. The Commission praises this performance, as community outreach is great preventive to having animals end up at the shelter.

In reviewing the spay and neuter surgeries performed, the shelter is still behind from 2019 numbers. In 2019, the shelter completed 7,439 spay and neuter surgeries. For 2022 (close of business 10/23/22), the shelter is currently at 5,151. When looking at the breakdown of the data, it appears there are less public (owned pets) surgeries being completed compared to 2019, thus creating the gap. The Commission is aware of open surgical vet tech positions and encourages placing a high priority on hiring for these positions. The Commission also suggests a review of the operations of 2019 which allowed for a higher capacity of services and determine how to make the needed changes. Spay and neuter services are great preventive resource that results in fewer animals coming into the shelter.

It should be noted that shelter staff have seen an increase in puppies and young animals coming to the shelter. This would correlate with decreased number of spay and neuter surgeries completed with owned pets in 2020 and 2021.

Addendum January 10, 2023

The shelter notes they ended the 2022 year in completing a total of 6,150 spay and neuter surgeries of cats and dogs.

**The Commission recommends that the BCAS leadership team invest in learning about progressive sheltering programs from organizations such as HASS, Maddie's Fund, HeARTs Speak, Fear Free, American Pets Alive, and the Shelter Playgroup Alliance.**

**The Commission strongly encourages the immediate hiring of surgical vet techs to fill the open positions.**

### **III. Commission Changes**

Deborah Stone Hess was a founding member of the Commission and served for seven years. She announced in late 2021 that she was resigning effective after the March 2022 meeting to pursue personal opportunities. Deborah referred Chris Shaughness as the new chair, and she was voted in unanimously in the January 2022 meeting. Chris assumed the chair position in March 2022.

During 2022, a Commission member created a great deal of disruption for the Commission and BCAS. The Commission unanimously agreed not to hold meetings until the issue with this member has been resolved. Even though the Commission has not met formally, key members have stayed in communication via email, and the Commission continued its duties effectively.

The Commission drafted a Code of Conduct in early 2022, which we hope will prevent problems such as these from future members. The document has been under review by the county administration with no update for when it will be approved.

**The Commission recommends passage of the Code of Conduct, ensuring that all members sign and agree to follow it.**

### **IV. BCAS Hiring and Retention**

Dr. Andrulis, previous Chief of BCAS, left the position in December 2021 and the position remained vacant until October 1, 2022. Jonny Akchin, previous Deputy Chief, left BCAS in October 2021 and his position was vacant until April 2022. The Commission was told that these unreasonable gaps were due to delayed processes within the county government. In April 2022, BCAS hired a new Deputy Chief, however, six weeks later she resigned unexpectedly. A new Chief was recommended in June and the new Deputy Chief in July. Both assumed the new positions on October 1, 2022. Both candidates were active BCAS employees of many years and their approval should never have taken so long. The Commission is concerned about these extreme delays and how it impacts crucial operations at BCAS.

Other positions are open within BCAS and the Commission wishes to see them filled expeditiously. Any delays have significant impacts to BCAS's operations and ability to save animals lives.

Significant improvements have been made in 2022 to the volunteer program, including a new manual and operating procedures. More volunteers have been on-boarded and regular volunteer meetings have been held. The Commission commends the BCAS staff for continuing to grow the program and looks forward to continued use of volunteers to enhance shelter programs.

**The Commission recommends a thorough review of the hiring process. The review would include from the time a position becomes vacant to the time the position is filled, in order to determine where bottlenecks exist and find ways to streamline the process to make it more efficient. Furthermore, these gaps put undue stress to other staff members, risking a negative impact to the workplace environment.**

## **V. Animal Intake and Management**

The years 2020 and 2021 were difficult for BCAS due to the pandemic, requiring many changes to operations and interaction with the public. As the public gradually resumed their lives as usual, BCAS began to see an uptick in surrenders and strays. This trend is occurring nationwide resulting in overcrowding of shelters and rescues. Several factors are contributing to the problem: people are back to being busy and claim they don't have time anymore for the pets, inflation is creating financial issues for pet owners, evictions have increased, and people cannot keep their pets or find housing that accepts them. Many of this information can be found on Shelter Animals Count, Best Friends Animal Sanctuary, and from well-respected leaders in animal welfare.

The Commission has learned from BCAS staff that a significant number of dogs arriving at the shelter are adolescents, suggesting they were most likely obtained during the lockdown phase of the pandemic. Many of these dogs have been described as under socialized and as a result, staff are reporting the need to sustain a higher level of vigilance for safety. Staff report many of these dogs have required behavior modification which requires more time and expertise. Additionally, the shelter has found these dogs are more difficult to adopt and/or get to rescue.

Due to the above-mentioned information, the Commission finds there should be increased emphasis on safety training for staff and volunteer. Please note there is a free online training program called "Fear Free." Their mission is defined as "to prevent and alleviate fear, anxiety and stress in pets by inspiring and education people care for them." There are other local shelters using this program with their staff and volunteers. According the BCAS, all medical staff has already been trained, and it will be made available to volunteers.

Additionally, we ask that the shelter assess their enrichment plan to the dogs. It is no secret that an animal shelter is one of the most stressful places for a dog and enrichment is crucial to lowering the stress and divert behavior concerns. We request a plan to address this issue.

The Commission has learned that approval is being sought from the county to create a full-time behavior and training position. An additional position for a foster coordinator has been requested as well.

**The Commission fully supports the addition of the two vital behavior and training and foster positions which should help a great deal with finding homes for the pets and reducing overcrowding at the shelter.**

**The Commission created a community resource list for BCAS staff in hopes to help divert owner surrenders. The Commission would like to see BCAS staff and/or volunteers work on expanding this list and keeping it current.**

**The Commission recommends the continued execution of Fear Free safety training due to concerns about dog bites to staff and volunteers.**

**The Commission recommends that the shelter evaluate their current dog enrichment program and make the needed enhancements to divert behavior concerns.**

## **VI. Outstanding Issues from 2021 Report**

The Commission would like to revisit two important issues from the 2021 annual report to ensure that they are being addressed and implemented in 2023: 1) Playgroups and 2) Continuation of the Working Cat program.

While Dr. Andrulis was the chief of BCAS, she and a few volunteers attended the Playgroup Alliance training to start the implementation process of playgroups for dogs. Since Dr. Andrulis' departure that process has come to a halt. The Commission understands there are many pressing issues at the shelter; however, if the full-time behaviorist position is filled, the Commission asks that the implementation of dog playgroups become a high priority.

Similarly, the Commission realizes that the number of feral cats coming into the shelter has increased as have the demands on staff. When Becky Sass-Crews was moved to Dundalk, the Commission expressed concern that the Working Cat program would no longer be a priority. We were assured that it was still important. The Commission would like to see a report on the Working Cat program to include the number of cats successfully sent out, and the number of cats that could not be included in the program and reasons why.

**The Commission would like to see a plan for implementing playgroups once the behaviorist position has been filled.**

**The Commission would like to see a report on the Working Cat program, to include the number of cats successfully sent out, and the number of cats that could not be included in the program and reasons why.**

## **VII. Conclusion and Recommendations**

BCAS is a highly visible and important community resource. The operation is subject to scrutiny and judgement from anyone who interacts with it or knows someone who has interacted with it. The public cherishes its pets, considering them to be as family members, and depends upon BCAS to provide exemplary services. The Commission asks the county administration to understand the importance of the organization and place the appropriate prioritization of its needs.

1. The Commission recommends passage of the Advisory Commission Code of Conduct, ensuring that all members sign and agree to follow it.
2. The Commission recommends a thorough review of the BCAS hiring process from the time the position becomes vacant up to the time it is filled to determine where bottlenecks exist and find ways to streamline the process to make it more efficient.
3. BCAS has several critical open positions. The Commission requests that the county administration expedite the process to get the positions filled immediately.
4. The Commission created a resource list for BCAS staff with information which could be helpful for owners to prevent them from surrendering the pets. The Commission advises that BCAS staff or volunteers keep this list current and continue to grow it.
5. The Commission recommends that the shelter evaluate their current dog enrichment program and make the needed enhancements to divert behavior concerns.
6. The Commission would like to see a plan for implementing playgroups once the behaviorist position has been filled.
7. The Commission would like to see a report on the Working Cat program to include the number of cats successfully sent out, and the number of cats that could not be included in the program and reasons why.
8. Although not discussed above, the Commission requests that BCAS continues to publish their weekly statistics on social media and find additional outlets to promote their successes. Positive press to the public is vital.
9. The Commission does its best to stay current with trends and best practices in sheltering. We advise that shelter management and staff do the same by attending workshops, conferences, and following national groups on social media/subscribing to newsletters. The Commission recommends that the BCAS leadership team invest in learning about progressive sheltering programs from organizations such as HASS, Maddie's Fund, HeARTs Speak, Fear Free, American Pets Alive, and the Shelter Playgroup Alliance. The Commission would like for shelter management to provide a quarterly briefing at the Commission meetings of their actions to stay current and any processes they have implemented as a result.
10. It is a standard practice for organizations to develop a strategic plan. BCAS is under the Department of Health and Human Services which has its own strategic plan. The Commission recommends that the BCAS leadership team and department managers create a list of goals for 2023 and the tactics they will use to achieve these goals. The Commission would be happy to assist with this process.



The Advisory Commission commends the hard work and dedication of the BCAS staff. We recognize that they have a very demanding job that has not become any easier this year. We are grateful for their partnership, open communication, and appreciate that they have taken our recommendations in the past. We look forward to continuing this productive relationship.

We submit this report respectfully to members of the Baltimore County Council and Baltimore County Executive Johnny Olszewski.